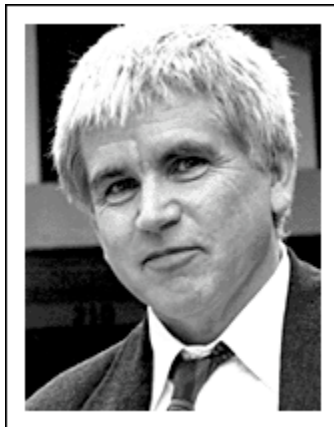


IVORY TOWER

SALON

IS MIKE DAVIS' LOS ANGELES

all in his head?



He's been lionized as a prescient Marxist prophet of end-of-the-continent doom and gloom. But a growing number of critics charge that the author of "City of Quartz" has feet of clay.

BY VERONIQUE DE TURENNE

There's a lovely fountain at the top of the Bunker Hill steps in downtown Los Angeles, and that's where Mike Davis and I are spending Sunday afternoon.

The broad staircase, a welcoming sine wave that links Hope and Fifth streets, faces the city's rebuilt Central Library. A never-thinning crowd all but obscures the library's heavy doors. Behind us, scores of people wander the patchwork of lawns, plazas and fountains that connect Bunker Hill's skyscrapers. I'm holding "[Ecology of Fear](#)," Davis' 484-page haymaker aimed at the soft white underbelly of Los Angeles. It's a chronicle of apocalypse, a study of a racially Balkanized city beset by natural plagues of biblical proportions: world-record rains, devastating fires, consuming floods, whirling tornadoes and disease-crazed squirrels.

"You weren't exactly honest when you described Bunker Hill, were you?" I ask gently, opening the book. Davis portrays Bunker Hill, a formerly rundown area that was redeveloped in the '60s, as an example of the sterile, repressive urban spaces created by the racist Angeleno

ruling class. Davis bites his lip. "You wrote about walled, whites-only fortresses, with bulletproof steel doors, no pedestrian access and security cameras on every corner. I don't see that. Do you?"

Davis puts down his carnitas burrito from the Grand Central Market, draws on a smoothie from the juice bar near the Water Garden and starts pacing. A Latino family seated near a Robert Graham sculpture watches, bemused. "I'm not wrong, I just tweaked things for effect," he insists. "You will find metal doors -- OK, they're on the parking garages downstairs. There are lots of -- OK, two -- pedways in Bunker Hill, and one of them does have an electronic door. It's truth the way I see it."

It was an enlightening interview, but it had one problem. I made it up. I was on Bunker Hill that day, but Davis was in New York. The conversation didn't take place. We've never met.

Still, Mike Davis can't complain. He can't fire off an angry letter calling for my head because I've violated the most basic rule of journalism. Because, as poet and environmentalist Lewis MacAdams revealed in last week's L.A. Weekly, Davis has done the same thing himself. It turns out that in a 1989 cover story for the Weekly, Davis invented an entire conversation with MacAdams, complete with vivid outdoor setting.

Faking one interview doesn't put Davis in the league of notorious fiction writers like former New Republic *Wunderkind* [Stephen Glass](#), but the acclaimed author of "City of Quartz" and "Ecology of Fear" now faces accusations that reach beyond this journalistic lapse. A growing number of critics claim that Davis' scholarship and reporting are so inaccurate and biased as to border on the deceitful, that he sifts and picks his facts to fit his dark Marxist vision. But unlike journalistic outcasts like Glass and Boston Globe columnists [Mike Barnicle](#) and [Patricia Smith](#), whose fast and loose dealings with reality led to disgrace and dismissal, Davis has paid no price for his freewheeling ways. In fact, ironically for a Marxist, he has profited. Until now.

In a brilliant and controversial career as Los Angeles' self-appointed scholar of doom, Davis has earned worldwide praise. The son of a meat cutter who helped found his local union, Davis left high school to become a meat cutter himself when his father became ill. He then learned to drive big rigs -- which became a selling point with affluent leftist readers impressed by his blue-collar mystique. His political evolution began with memberships in Students for a Democratic Society, the Teamsters and the Communist Party. At age 28, Davis attended UCLA and studied economics and history. He moved to London in

1981, where he became an editor of *New Left Review* and completed his political transformation into a Marxist. Now 52, Davis teaches urban theory at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, and he's a sought-after speaker on the lecture circuit. This spring, when he received a \$315,000 MacArthur Foundation grant for "exceptionally creative individuals," a friend from his trucking days called to see whether Davis would finally be buying the rig of his dreams. Not likely.

Davis first earned notice with "City of Quartz," the opening volume of his Los Angeles trilogy. In that book, Davis parses the city's power structure to unveil a police state rife with class warfare, ruled by corrupt politicians and planners bent on preserving an all-white status quo. His prediction in "Quartz" of widespread violence, two years before the 1992 riots that followed the Rodney King verdicts, earned him prophet status and helped make the book required reading in many college classrooms. It also gave him carte blanche to continue his highly personal scrutiny of Los Angeles.

"Ecology of Fear," his 1998 portrayal of Los Angeles as an "apocalypse theme park," reiterates Davis' social critique of racism, elitism and class struggle, and adds to it a new vision: natural disaster. Just as Los Angeles' white ruling class, sequestered away in gated, guarded communities, ignores the rage and simmering violence of the city's oppressed, zoned-away, largely minority poor, Davis argues, so too it ignores the doom-laden geography of the city itself, replete with flood plains, fire zones and earthquake faults. Davis' Los Angeles is quite literally dancing on a volcano.



V O R Y T O W E R

"Ecology of Fear" catapulted Davis from fringe-leftie-intellectual status to the cultural mainstream. It won many favorable reviews (with some dissents, including D.J. Waldie's [essay](#) in these pages) and was on the Los Angeles Times bestseller list for 12 weeks (joined during the same period by "City of Quartz"), peaking at No. 1.

By rights, Davis should be basking in his success. But recently a gadfly has appeared in the ointment -- a gadfly named Brady Westwater. Westwater is a Malibu realtor -- an almost laughably perfect occupation for a Davis nemesis -- and third-generation Angeleno who has cast himself as "Ecology's" post-publication fact-checker and Davis' personal tormentor.

The eccentric Westwater is an unlikely catalyst for the growing questions about Davis' scholarship. In fact, Westwater isn't even his real name; he adopted it years ago as a nom de plume and declines to reveal his real name. Co-workers say he can be found in his office at all hours, often working on his computer or leafing through his voluminous files on L.A. Westwater's interests range from art and architecture (he loves the modernist architecture Davis despises, and is obsessed with defending it) to the history of the city.

I asked Westwater to take me on a walk (a real one) through Bunker Hill, the redeveloped area that Davis cites as a scary, "Prisoner"-like model of urban-planning malevolence. Westwater delights in pointing out the inaccuracies in Davis' account. He waltzes up to each glass-sided building and fairly sings, "No metal doors! No

locks! No pedways!" On a ride up Angel's Flight, the short funicular railway that connects Bunker Hill with the mostly working-class shopping district at its bottom, Westwater happily points out that, contrary to Davis' assertion that Bunker Hill was created to exclude unruly people of color, he's one of the only white people in the car.

In both "Ecology of Fear" and "City of Quartz," Davis portrays Bunker Hill as an inaccessible fortress where guard staff command consoles that operate bulletproof roll-down doors. He based his portrayal of the hill on his experience during the 1992 riots, when he was there -- but he leaves the impression that the 1998 Bunker Hill is the same place. (Even during the riots, it seems more likely that Bunker Hill escaped the rioting because it was unfamiliar -- and elevated -- terrain than because of remote-controlled gates.)

I saw a different place. First, we couldn't find any bulletproof doors. It turns out Davis isn't referring to the building entrances, but to metal doors in the ground floor parking structures -- not quite as "Metropolis"-like. Bunker Hill's skyscrapers were wide open, even the Sunday after Thanksgiving. It was a holiday weekend, and Bunker Hill was humming. Dozens of Latino families, their shopping at Grand Central Market complete, rode up Angels Flight to wander the lawns and terraces, their children playing beside them. A group of 50 German tourists lingered near the Water Garden, an outdoor amphitheater that is often filled with live music and dance. A well-to-do Anglo couple pored over the brochure of a downtown walking tour. Bunker Hill is indeed elevated, but it's not segregated. Far from being a walled fortress, it's a cluster of skyscrapers connected by public space.

Westwater insists it's his love of L.A., not his vested interest in promoting the city, that underlies his obsession with debunking Davis. Whatever his reasons are, however, there's little question he's obsessed. Westwater blasts off repeated faxes to editors, accusing Davis of everything from changing his story about where he was born to mistaking the location of the Los Angeles Times. In a [23-page missive](#), which often reads like those religious tracts you find tucked under your windshield wiper, Westwater virtually challenges Davis to a duel, claiming that "of the heavily footnoted and researched facts" in "Ecology of Fear," "not just a handful, not just a few dozen here and there, but many hundred (and hundreds) of them -- were simply made up."

Westwater scoffs at Davis' claim that Los Angeles is battered by El Niño rainfalls of "unrivaled" ferocity. He disputes his claim that the Westlake area of L.A. has the highest burn rate of any city in the country. He challenges Davis' definition of tornadoes, the subject of the chapter

"Our Secret Kansas." He mocks Davis' gaffe in "City of Quartz" in which, during a discussion of the battle between the Jewish Westside and the Gentile downtowners, he identified Howard Ahmanson, a right-leaning Christian, as Jewish. (Davis says he has admitted the mistake.)

Perhaps most significantly, Westwater claims Davis' version of the history of Bunker Hill is false. Davis presents the new financial district as the work of the Committee of 25, a star chamber of Los Angeles power brokers whose sole mission was to keep out the lower-class rabble who rioted in Watts in 1965. But Westwater says the committee was well-known and was formed in 1952, well before the Watts violence. Even more damningly, Westwater claims that Davis got these facts *right* in a much earlier essay, then changed them for his new book.

Most journalists passed on Westwater's manifesto. But Jill Stewart, a columnist for the alternative weekly New Times Los Angeles, adopted the cause. In an essay titled "Peddling Fear," Stewart presented Westwater's allegations as fact. She matched Davis' pugilistic style jab for jab, calling him a "city-hating socialist raised in a remote desert town so small it no longer exists."

After Stewart gave Westwater's rantings a public voice, the Internet got sucked in. A piece about Westwater's critique on the Web site [Suck](#) has ignited a raging flame war about Davis' scholarship. "I can barely express my feelings on the whole Mike Davis fiasco," a subscriber wrote. "I've had nightmares about it. I bought into 'City of Quartz' so thoroughly, and then was blown away by 'Ecology of Fear' -- when in the latter, there were lies I should have immediately spotted based on facts I myself knew! Instead I was thinking, 'Wow, I must be remembering wrong.' There's an important lesson here about hero worship, I suppose."

What may turn out to be the most damaging story about Davis, however, was a sympathetic one: the L.A. Weekly piece that outs Davis for fabricating an interview. MacAdams sounds surprisingly genial about the journalistic breach. "We were standing together at the Fremont Entrance to Elysian Park, a place I had never been," he writes. "Though we never actually talked, the words he put in my mouth made me sound like I knew a lot more about the L.A. River than I actually did. I told him to go ahead with the piece just the way it was."

Whether MacAdams' account of this is just a coincidence, coming as it does on the heels of Stewart's denunciation, or an attempt at spin control ("Oh that Mike, we know how he likes to exaggerate to get the story"), the Weekly piece swiftly joined the New Times tirade in fax machines and e-mail servers far and wide; admirers, detractors, acolytes and academics have joined the debate. There's a definite

political tinge to the discussion: The reputation of one of America's few avowedly Marxist writers is at stake.

Getting to the bottom of the controversy isn't easy. Certainly Davis' fabricated interview does not inspire confidence. But an admittedly cursory examination of some of the points at issue leads one to the conclusion that while Davis is highly selective in his research and sometimes out-and-out wrong, he is not the utterly incompetent (or unethical) figure presented by Westwater. Whether the larger worth of Davis' work is invalidated by his tendentious approach is a question that readers must answer for themselves.

Let's start with Westwater's assertion that Davis is wrong when he says that Los Angeles County's San Gabriel Mountains have recorded the highest rainfall in the world. Douglas Sherman, a USC professor with expertise in natural disaster, backs Davis up. "He's right," Sherman said. "The San Gabriels have measured the highest-intensity rainfall in the world. When the rain lasts long enough, it flushes into the L.A. Basin and has very serious effects."

Westwater's more important criticism, that Davis got the entire history of the Bunker Hill development wrong, is harder to evaluate. Westwater may be right that Davis got some of the facts and chronology wrong, but several experts in Los Angeles history and planning pointed out that Davis' deeper analysis is not susceptible to a simple factual debunking. The jury remains out on his Bunker Hill analysis.

But there's no question that Davis makes, shall we say, an imaginative use of facts. Take his alarmingly elastic definition of Los Angeles. At times, he's talking about the city itself. Other times, he includes terrain stretching from southern Orange County all the way to northern Ventura County. To a New Yorker, this could well be Los Angeles, but Davis knows better. He also says there are 2,000 gangs in L.A. The Los Angeles Police Department's gang unit counts 400. Even Los Angeles County, which includes 88 cities, falls 150 gangs short of Davis' figure.

Davis claims L.A. has 500 gated communities. The city's Department of Planning says 100. And Davis talks about violent crime without ever reporting the five-year decline in such crime countywide. In fact, the murder rate in Los Angeles has dropped 50 percent since 1992. You won't find even a footnote for that in "Ecology of Fear."

Even the photographs in the book take liberties. A shot of New Hampshire Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard does look like a ghost town -- unless you know L.A. Shadows falling on Wilshire Boulevard suggest the photo was taken just after sunrise, when even Times Square might look deserted.

Do these errors and distortions raise serious questions about Davis' whole project -- or are they relatively unimportant details? "I think it is fair to say his book is a work of imagination," says Kevin Starr, California state librarian and himself the author of numerous books about the state. "I'm not saying it is false, but when you present materials transformed by imagination as fact, then you'll be liable to the kind of corrections he's getting. I am not surprised that an anti-Davis faction would rise up."




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Starr does praise Davis for creating a new way of thinking about Los Angeles: "He makes us look at the environment of Southern California in a different way. Mike slows down the clock and says we've only been here for 200 years -- we don't know the sequence of events yet."

But he adds an ominous warning. "There is something in Mike that might have made him, 50 years ago, a good priest -- helping the poor, outrage that the poor could be neglected -- but he doesn't have an adequate theology or ideology with which to deal with these things," Starr said. "He can't find any symbols of redemption -- he has no modes of atonement. All sorts of people around him are not seeing what he's seeing, and if he doesn't watch it, he'll become a crank. It's a fine line. I have compassion and concern for him, but what's the difference between a prophet and a crank?"

The difference could be unbiased scholarship. Author Carolyn See, whose novel "Golden Days" takes a drubbing in "Ecology's" chapter about Los Angeles fiction, says she has never seen anyone work as hard as Davis. "I was at the Getty with him," she said of their time together on a fellowship. "In researching books on disaster in L.A., he turned up things I had never heard of. I thought I had seen it all, and he found stuff no one else has ever found. On the one hand, he is capable of really hard work, but his research is flawed because he has come to his conclusions ahead of time, and if the facts don't fit what he wants to see, he doesn't mess with them."

Seismologist Wayne Thatcher was surprised to hear what

Davis had concluded about California earthquakes from Thatcher's own work. Davis refers to Thatcher's "chaos theory of earthquake frequency," and declares that future quakes cannot be predicted from previous quakes. The problem is, Thatcher's writings refer to much larger quakes, such as the great Alaska earthquake of 1964, which was 1,000 times larger than the 1971 Sylmar quake Davis cites in the book. "Well, even scientists have been known to exaggerate a bit," Thatcher said, laughing. "I suspect that's what this gentleman has indulged in."

There's no question that Davis' work is in the long tradition of doomsday predictions and fictions -- not a few of them involving L.A. Certainly the popularity of "Ecology of Fear" may be due, in part, to a kind of haunted-mansion appeal. But not everyone views Davis' apocalyptic bent kindly. Some worry Davis robs ordinary people of the ability to judge the risk in their lives accurately: Should they forget about counting fat grams if a killer tornado is on the way? Others find it suspicious that Davis' bleak view dooms the city just as Los Angeles' traditional minorities are taking power.

"I object to the way he treats Latinos -- they have been fodder for his Marxist fantasies," says Gregory Rodriguez, associate editor for the Pacific News Service. "I think it's condescending. I tend to tie Mike Davis into a whole Anglo-apocalyptic school. There's a generation of whites who are growing older, and they have a sense that the end is near. The era in which their preeminence was unique is over, and Mike Davis feeds into that. At the same time, this is the moment other groups are going to get a piece of the pie, so Davis is dooming our world at the very moment we are taking our place in it."

It would be easy to dismiss Westwater's critique as the harpings of a crank -- although even eccentrics can raise valid questions. But Davis has more formidable adversaries. Perhaps his harshest serious critic is Philip Ethington, a professor of history at the University of Southern California. A Getty scholar at the same time as Davis and See, Ethington recalls Davis' ability to grasp and memorize information -- but questions his objectivity.

"He retains everything he's ever read," Ethington said. "He has a photographic memory. But he has one way of seeing the world, and he filters what he learns through that view. It's always a classic Marxist analysis." In an upcoming piece for Southern California Quarterly, Ethington takes a particularly tough look at Davis' research technique, focusing on a pair of footnotes Davis uses to support his claim that one-third of the Los Angeles area has been paved over. One footnote refers to an author who himself cites only a 1973 Time magazine article; the other is based on information provided by Davis himself. "There's a pattern

of poor scholarship bordering on deception," Ethington says. "He uses secondary and tertiary sources, which can mislead the reader. They don't falsify the larger thesis, yet they make it difficult to either build on his work or engage him in a meaningful debate."

The facts of Davis' own life have also become a matter of speculation. Stewart's *New Times* essay, following Westwater, looks askance at Davis' fudging of his birthplace: Although his publisher places it in L.A., he was actually born in Fontana, 60 miles distant. She also makes much of the fact that he's been married five times -- a fact that his second wife, Jan Breidenbach, explains in *MacAdams' L.A. Weekly* piece as "the triumph of hope over experience."

Davis' defenders argue that his critics don't understand his achievement. According to David Reid, editor of several California anthologies (his most recent, "Sex, Death and God in L.A.," includes two Davis essays), Davis has always angered a certain group of Los Angeles academics. "They like to think of Mike as the unwitting Marxist tool of a cabal of L.A.-hating New Yorkers," Reid said. "The fact is, Mike just dramatizes things. That's what journalists do. It's a way to get your point across."

Michael Dear, director of the Southern California Studies Center at USC, lauds Davis for a new way of thinking about the region. "His greatest achievement is to focus attention on Southern California and to show what our problems are -- that's a very important achievement," Dear said. "Given that Southern California is traditionally regarded as an aberrant exception, Mike's model for the future has acted as a catalyst for a conversation about the region, and that conversation is long overdue."

What does Davis himself say? In a long interview, Davis denied that he was biased, defended his research and wondered about critics who bring in his personal life. "Serious criticism, however difficult it may be to accept, is the best thing a writer can hope to attract," Davis said. "The stuff about political differences makes sense -- I'm a Marxist, and as such I have to have thick skin. But why is it now expected that authors' personalities become a part of the book? It makes no sense, and that is the most difficult part for me."

What about the piped 1989 interview with *MacAdams*? "You've got to understand, that was 1989, it was the first independent story I had done for the *Weekly*, and I was trying to figure out how to write journalism," Davis says. "I had been studying other journalists, who always seemed to start their stories with these colorful scenes. So I went to Lewis and said, 'What if we had this conversation?' That's true, no denial. I did that. But you get the impression from

Lewis that that's my modus operandi, and it's not."

Davis willingly discusses points of contention in his book, and while you can't change his mind, he doesn't seem bent on changing yours, either. He's surprised to hear that his book reveals little of his love for Los Angeles, and he's wounded by the thought. "I love Los Angeles," he says. "How can you not see that? I suppose the book is, in the end, a failure if it betrays none of the sense of deep feeling I have about the city. But that's where being a radical comes in -- you also have to rain on the parade."

As for Westwater's objections, Davis calls them a misunderstanding of his work. "It's fair to say, 'Hey wait, how did you calculate these costs?' That's fair. But (Westwater's) objections seem to be largely made up of misrepresentations of what I'm saying. The idea that I'm engaged in some kind of deception is ridiculous."

Davis said his third book, the completion of his L.A. trilogy, will focus more on the people of Los Angeles, on the waves of immigrants shaping the city. Many of his readers, detractors and admirers alike, are looking forward to that

"Los Angeles is not only the city as Mike presents it, otherwise it wouldn't be working as well as it is," Kevin Starr said. "He never talks about an evening at the Hollywood Bowl, an evening at the L.A. Opera -- which is marvelous -- or about the Lakers or the L.A. Marathon. He hasn't told us about the millions of people who are finding a second, third and fourth start in L.A. and making it a distinctive city, and he needs to do that. Perhaps when he does, he can find balance."

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